

# Guest or pest? Animal rights activists at the 2005 Royal Zoological Society's annual forum

**Peter B. Banks**

School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of NSW.

Councillor and Secretary of Royal Zoological Society of NSW, Associate Editor, Australian Zoologist and member of Pest or Guest Forum Organising Team

There is little doubt that pest control and animal welfare need to have an intimate relationship. Any attempt to control the numbers of a pest species will inevitably invoke animal welfare considerations. This very issue is at the core of a growing shift in the focus of pest management from controlling the pest to controlling its impact. But for some members of the audience, concerns about animal rights (as distinct from animal welfare) were overwhelming and drove a conspiracy to disrupt the scientific agenda of the Pest or Guest conference on 22 October 2005.

Members of at least six different organisations worked together to replace scientific discussion with the single minded, single issue, agenda that all animals should live, regardless of the consequences. Their collective actions were organized and deliberate and, with hindsight, their tactics are now obvious. At every opportunity they monopolized limited question time with long winded soliloquies, which rarely related to the topic of the preceding presentation and left the speakers with little chance to respond. They were the first to raise their arms high at the call for questions. They sat on the ends of rows to ensure easy access to the microphone. They dispersed themselves around the audience to appear to be in greater numbers. They used emotive language and cited disturbing incidents of animal cruelty to support their case, however unrelated to the presentations, and applauded loudly in support of each others statements. These were not scientific arguments they were outspoken moral position statements.

I have seen these tactics before, disrupting three other scientific meetings which addressed the subject of managing animals. My frustration prompted a letter to Nature (Banks 2005) warning other scientific bodies of the dangerous and disruptive impact of animal rights protestors at scientific conferences. During the genesis of this letter, an email discussion developed amongst other scientifically-minded members of the audience on the day, several who considered that the actions of the animal rights activists were not so bad. Some suggested that the activities of the animal-rights audience were misguided but harmless, others suggested we should be not distracted by their debate lest it distract us from our agenda. But in my opinion, the animal rights protestors were successful in overwhelming the typically reserved audience of the scientific meeting. They effectively gagged contributions on the science of the presentations, clearly distracting us from our agenda of how to see the matter of pest animals ecologically. Instead of discussing content of the talks, the plenary was directed

towards a discussion of the ethics of animal killing, the humanness of techniques and the rights of native versus exotic species. Their misinterpretation of fundamental ecological processes naturally induced frustrated responses from other scientific members of the audience, which soaked up yet more discussion time.

Animal rights groups do not hold the monopoly on caring for animals, nor do they hold the moral high ground on arguing a need to reduce animal killing. Indeed, the motivation for the Forum was all about better ways to control pest impact, not better ways to kill pests, a point obviously lost on these zealots. In their presentations, RZS council members and professional ecologists Rose and Banks (2007), Dickman (2007) and Murray et al. (2007) all challenged views on the impacts of animals traditionally viewed as pests. Brown (2007) reminded us to keep our focus on the managing the impact, not the pest. Cooper et al. (2007) juxtaposed the suffering of pest animals poisoned by 1080 with the suffering of native animals maimed, killed and pushed toward extinction by pests. And with a view to the future, both Brown (2007) and Herbert (2007) promoted smart ecological or biochemical ways to prevent population increases in pest animals, approaches that patently reduce the numbers of animals killed. While these ethical, yet scientifically based, aspects of pest control may have contributed to the ethical tone of the plenary debate, the animal rights zealots diverted any real opportunity for detailed scientific discussion towards a moral debate. I also fear that the intended audience of the day will remember more about the antics of the animal rights groups than the message in the talks. Thankfully, we have this enduring publication to redress this situation.

My challenge to environmental scientists, land managers and future conference convenors is to be vigilant against the possible aggressive, standover tactics of the animal rights groups. This challenge echoes an international call for scientists to stand up to misguided animal rights activism (Nature Editorial 2005). Elsewhere in the world, the tactics of animal rights/liberation protestors during the last 15 years have escalated to extremist intimidation and violence towards individual scientists, resulting in some groups being listed as terrorist organisations. While much of their attention has gone to animal use in medical research, any activity that involves animals is clearly a potential target (Marris 2006). Australia's biodiversity cannot afford the consequences of such extremism should land managers and ecologists to succumb to single-minded, ill-informed pressure groups.

My challenge to these animal rights groups (and indeed researchers on pest animals) is for them to consider the ethics of leaving alien wildlife unchecked to run their course and ignore the consequences. During the plenary discussion, Beryl Anderson (New South Wales Federation of Animal Societies) quoted Ghandi “the morals of a country can be measured by its treatment of its animals” (sic.). What then is the morality of actions which would knowingly and willingly abandon native wildlife to fate of invasive predators and competitors? Is there a net reduction in animal suffering when native species fall victim to alien predators, given that

a single feral cat may kill more than 20,000 individual vertebrates in a 7 year lifetime (Dickman 1996)? What is our moral role in having created environments which facilitate the success of these worldwide “superfauna”? And what is the ethical accountability for strangling a scientific conference aimed at developing approaches that conserve our unique wildlife using novel approaches that reduce the need to kill pests. Perhaps another quote from Ghandi will help in this moral dilemma: “I hold that, the more helpless a creature, the more entitled it is to the protection by man from the cruelty of man.” (Ghandi 1983).

## References

- Banks P.B.** 2005. Animal-rights zealots put wildlife welfare at risk. *Nature*, 438, 559-559
- Brown, P.R.** 2007. Managing feral house mice in agricultural ecosystems by reducing their impact on crops rather than just reducing their abundance. Pp 8 - 15 in *Pest or Guest: the zoology of overabundance*, edited by Daniel Lunney, Peggy Eby, Pat Hutchings and Shelley Burgin. Royal Zoological Society of NSW, Mosman, NSW, Australia.
- Cooper, D, Larsen, E, Shields, J.** 2007. 1080 and Wildlife: Scientific and ethical issues raised by its use on Australian Mammals Pp 229 - 232 in *Pest or Guest: the zoology of overabundance*, edited by Daniel Lunney, Peggy Eby, Pat Hutchings and Shelley Burgin. Royal Zoological Society of NSW, Mosman, NSW, Australia.
- Dickman C.R.** 1996. Overview of the impact of Feral Cats on Australian native fauna. Australian Government, Canberra.
- Dickman C.R.** 2007. The complex pest: interaction webs between pests and native species. Pp 208 - 215 in *Pest or Guest: the zoology of overabundance*, edited by Daniel Lunney, Peggy Eby, Pat Hutchings and Shelley Burgin. Royal Zoological Society of NSW, Mosman, NSW, Australia.
- Ghandi, M.K.** 1983. An autobiography: The story of my experiments with Truth. Dover Publishing, Dover
- Marris E.** 2006. Environmental activism: In the name of nature. *Nature*, 443, 498-501
- Murray, B.R., Dickman C.R., Robson, T., Haythornthwaite A., Cantlay, A.J., Dowsett, N. and Hills, N.** 2007. Effects of exotic plants in native vegetation on species richness and abundance of birds and mammals. Pp 216 - 221 in *Pest or Guest: the zoology of overabundance*, edited by Daniel Lunney, Peggy Eby, Pat Hutchings and Shelley Burgin. Royal Zoological Society of NSW, Mosman, NSW, Australia.
- Nature Editorial** 2005. Still not deterred. *Nature* 437: 1-2.
- Rose, T.A., and Banks, P.B.** 2007. Impacts of black rats (*Rattus rattus*) across an urban/bushland interface at Sydney's North Head. Pp 66 - 75 in *Pest or Guest: the zoology of overabundance*, edited by Daniel Lunney, Peggy Eby, Pat Hutchings and Shelley Burgin. Royal Zoological Society of NSW, Mosman, NSW, Australia.